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978-1-107-02424-3 - Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain

Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders and Marianne C. Stewart

Excerpt

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1 *The politics of affluence and austerity*

In the May 1997 general election ‘New Labour’ won a landslide victory. The roots of the New Labour project lay in four successive, traumatic election defeats experienced by the party over the period from May 1979 to April 1992. The gradual transformation of Old Labour during these years came to fruition in 1997 and it produced a spectacular electoral success under the leadership of Tony Blair. Two more victories followed in 2001 and 2005, making Blair the only Labour leader in history to win three successive general elections. In May 2010, the New Labour era ended. Although the 2010 general election produced a hung parliament, Labour’s much reduced share of seats made it very difficult – virtually impossible – for the party to continue in power as part of a viable coalition government. After five days of intensive interparty negotiations, Gordon Brown resigned as prime minister and Conservative Leader, David Cameron, was invited to form a government. The result was the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition, Britain’s first such government in over half a century.

In previous books, *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke *et al.*, 2004b) and *Performance Politics and the British Voter* (Clarke *et al.*, 2009b), we have investigated alternative explanations of voting behaviour that have been proposed to account for the fates of British political parties both in the ‘New Labour’ era and more generally. We have provided a theoretical account of electoral choice which applies not only to Britain but also to other contemporary mature democracies such as Canada, France, Germany and the United States (see e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2009a; Clarke and Whitten, 2013; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2012). According to this account, electoral choice in these countries is best understood as the product of the process of ‘valence’ or ‘performance’ politics. In a world of valence politics – where stakes are frequently high and risk is often better described as uncertainty – voters make choices primarily on the basis of evaluations of rival parties’ perceived abilities to deliver

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policy outcomes on salient issues involving broad consensus about what government should do.

In this new book, the overarching theme of valence politics is extended both theoretically and empirically to explain, for the first time, the rise and fall of New Labour during its 13 years in office, and, in particular, the dynamics of party support since 2005 and why the New Labour era came to an end in 2010. Although several books and ‘insider’ accounts have been published on various aspects of the New Labour story,¹ a comprehensive analysis of the electoral politics of New Labour has not been told. Marshalling valence politics concepts and using an unprecedented wealth of survey data collected in recent British Election Studies (BES) enable us to investigate factors affecting support for New Labour in depth. We also conduct an in-depth analysis of the forces affecting the evolution of party support since the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition came to power in May 2010 and factors that shaped the choices voters made in the May 2011 national referendum on adopting the Alternative Vote electoral system. In addition, recognizing the importance of voters’ reactions to policy delivery as a core theme in the valence politics model, we investigate how those reactions have influenced the dynamics of people’s subjective sense of well-being in the current era of austerity.

The valence politics model provides theoretical guidance for these investigations. Within a broadly defined rational choice framework, the valence politics model competes with spatial rivals as an explanation of electoral choice and party competition. Key ideas leading to the development of the valence politics model were advanced 50 years ago by Donald Stokes (Stokes, 1963; see also Stokes, 1992). As part of his insightful critique of spatial models of party competition, Stokes argued that voters rely heavily on their evaluations of rival parties’ perceived capacities to deliver policy outcomes in issue areas on which there is broad consensus about what government should do. A classic example is the economy. Virtually everyone wants vigorous, sustainable economic growth coupled with low rates of unemployment and inflation. Similarly, a vast majority wish to live in a society that is not vulnerable to personal and national security threats posed by criminals, terrorists and miscellaneous miscreants. Again, almost everyone wants affordable, accessible and effective public services in areas such as education, health, transportation and environmental protection. Persistent public concern with such valence issues means that they typically

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dominate the political agenda in Britain and other mature democracies. These issues are important in emerging democracies as well (Ho *et al.*, 2013). Although the mix of valence issues varies over time, their continuing overall salience works to focus political debate on ‘who can do the job’ rather than on ‘what the job should be’. As a consequence, evaluations of which party and which leader are best able to deliver on consensually agreed-upon policy goals are key drivers of voting in successive elections and do much to account for the dynamics of party support in inter-election periods.

The major alternative theoretical account of electoral choice, the spatial model of party competition, was developed in work by Duncan Black (1958) and Anthony Downs (1957). The key assumption underpinning this model is that *position or spatial issues* are the dominant factors governing voting decisions. Unlike valence issues, for spatial issues there is widespread *disagreement* in the electorate and among political parties regarding policy goals associated with these issues. For example, the Conservatives differ from Labour and the Liberal Democrats on the desirability of cutting taxes as a goal of government policy. Similarly, although both Labour and the Conservatives supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Liberal Democrats openly opposed it, reflecting widespread public disagreement about British involvement in the conflict. According to spatial theories, voters have exogenously determined preferences and they attempt to ‘maximize their utilities’ by supporting a party that is closest to them in a policy space defined by one or more position issues or more general ideological orientations. For their part, parties are strategic actors who try to maximize electoral support in light of knowledge of voters’ distributions in the commonly shared issue/ideological space. Although spatial models have been imaginatively elaborated in various ways, they have retained the core assumption that salient *position* issues are what matter for choices made by utility-maximizing voters (e.g. Adams *et al.*, 2005; Merrill and Grofman, 1999).

Academic theorizing about electoral choice, especially in the formal theory tradition, has been dominated by spatial models. In contrast, with the notable exception of the literature on ‘economic voting’ (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 1992; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Norpoth *et al.*, 1991), less attention has been accorded to valence issues – despite abundant evidence of the central role that they have played in successive general elections in Britain and elsewhere. We have

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compared the explanatory power of spatial and valence models of electoral choice in *Political Choice in Britain* and *Performance Politics and the British Voter* (see also Clarke *et al.*, 2009a). In the present volume we consider the relevance of these rival accounts of voting behaviour for understanding the rapidly changing economic and political context that has characterized Britain in recent years. A key difference from our earlier books is a focus on the dynamics of party support on a month-by-month basis throughout the entire 2005–10 Parliament and the first two years of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition. Using multivariate statistical procedures we estimate dynamic models of party support containing valence and spatial variables and a variety of sociodemographic measures. The aim is to explain the evolution of party support in Britain's fast-changing post-2005 political-economic environment.

Taking account of the volatile post-2005 context is crucial for understanding contemporary electoral politics, since the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s occurred during this period. Foreshadowed by the failure of the Northern Rock bank in autumn 2007, the crisis defined the political agenda in the run-up to the 2010 election and its effects have continued to reverberate strongly since then. A massively disruptive intervention, the crisis constitutes a natural experiment for testing the robustness of rival valence and spatial models for explaining electoral choice in good times and bad. An analysis of cross-level interactions between individual-level predictors of voting and contextual variables, capturing the political and economic dimensions of the crisis, enables us to investigate the explanatory power of rival valence and spatial models as the political-economic context has shifted from prosperity and stability to recession and turmoil. This could not be done in our earlier analyses of voting in the 2001 and 2005 general elections since the political-economic context in which voters made their choices was one of relatively uninterrupted 'good times'.

A second innovative feature of the present book concerns how voters try to make sense of, and hence make sensible choices in, politics. The development of our theoretical and empirical analyses draws on important insights from related fields. In particular, a key finding in political psychology is that many voters have low levels of political knowledge and lack coherent ideological frameworks that would enable them

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to make sense of political issues and events (Converse, 1964). The long-standing puzzle is to determine whether such voters can make sensible political decisions and, if so, how they do it. Recent research addresses this puzzle by showing that many people are ‘cognitive misers’ who use heuristics, that is, information cues or cognitive shortcuts, as guides. These heuristics help them avoid the costs of gathering and processing large amounts of complicated and oftentimes contradictory information required to understand issues and events in a complex and uncertain political world (see e.g. Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Lupia *et al.*, 2000; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991).

In particular, the use of ‘fast and frugal heuristics’ (Gigerenzer, 2008; Gigerenzer *et al.*, 2011) allows people to make effective decisions while at the same time greatly reducing the costs and extent of information processing. These findings are relevant to an aspect of the long-standing paradox of participation – the fact that voters have little incentive to invest heavily in learning about the complexities of politics prior to casting their vote since, acting as individuals, they have little influence over the outcome of an election. Fast and frugal information processing greatly minimizes decision-making costs. Analyses in this book develop and extend these ideas by considering how people use leader images, partisan attachments and other types of information to make electoral choices.

A third feature of the book is its focus on the roles of interpersonal and impersonal communications during the ‘long’ and ‘short’ campaigns preceding polling day. The ‘Ground War’, that is, the election campaign at the constituency level, and the ‘Air War’, the election campaign at the national level, are modelled using very large-scale, internet-based surveys and variables that index the influence of the media during the campaign. Leadership debates are an important innovation in British election campaigns and in 2010 the first-ever leaders’ debate had a major impact. The impact of the debates and other developments in the campaign are analyzed using the 2010 BES Rolling Campaign Panel Survey (RCPS) data which enable us to monitor the evolution of key political attitudes on a daily basis.

A fourth feature of the book is the use of data gathered in monthly BES Continuous Monitoring Surveys (CMS) to study factors affecting the popularity of the new Coalition Government over the June 2010–August 2012 period. This very large data set enables us to investigate

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the explanatory power of competing accounts of party support in a dynamic context where the new Coalition Government has taken bold actions to stabilize Britain's finances. Reacting to the Government's large-scale cuts in public spending and public-sector employment coupled with substantial increases in taxes and fees, critics have blamed Prime Minister Cameron and his colleagues for derailing an incipient recovery and promoting rising unemployment, a 'double-dip' recession and extensive, unnecessary misery. Whether the Coalition will pay a heavy price in terms of diminished support in the next general election remains to be seen – but the stage is set.

A fifth feature is a thorough analysis of various forces – particularly levels of political knowledge, risk orientations and cues provided by the major political parties and their leaders – that influenced voting in the May 2011 AV ballot referendum. Very large surveys conducted as part of the BES CMS enable us to study the evolution of support/opposition for the AV ballot at both the aggregate and individual levels. In the event, the AV proposal was soundly defeated, thereby effectively settling the issue of reform of the Britain's voting system for the foreseeable future. Analysing forces affecting the choices voters made in the referendum is thus an interesting and important topic in its own right.

A sixth innovative feature of the book is an analysis of the political economy of subjective well-being in Britain. Stimulated by the utilitarian theories of Bentham (e.g. Mill, 1987) and the work of subsequent political reformers, the promotion of public well-being has been cited as a major goal of democratic politics and it is a major underlying theme in the valence politics model of electoral choice. In recent years, scholars and politicians (including Prime Minister David Cameron) have recognized the importance of learning about factors that influence citizens' sense of subjective well-being. In the present volume, we employ multilevel modelling procedures to investigate how salient contextual events and conditions (the economic crisis and recession, large-scale retrenchment in public-sector programmes and spending, tax increases) have influenced the public's sense of well-being over and above the nonpolitical factors considered in previous research.

In the next section we describe survey components of the 2010 British Election Study employed in this volume.

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BES surveys

The 2010 British Election Study gathered data using representative national in-person and internet surveys. In this book, we make extensive use of the data gathered in the 2010 Rolling Campaign Panel Survey (RCPS), as well as data collected in monthly national Continuous Monitoring Surveys that began in April 2004. All of the RCPS and CMS data were gathered via the internet by YouGov, plc. The RCPS was very much larger than traditional in-person surveys with an initial sample size of nearly 17 000 respondents, approximately 4000 of whom had been interviewed earlier as part of the 2005 RCPS. This inter-election panel feature of the 2010 RCPS makes it possible to track the attitudes and behaviour of a large sample of respondents from just before the 2005 general election all the way through to the 2010 election and beyond. The large 2010 RCPS sample also enabled us to resurvey over 500 respondents each day during the 30 days of the official campaign, thereby providing a daily tracking record of the impact on public opinion of the leader debates and other events. A third wave of interviews was conducted with 2010 RCPS respondents immediately after the general election took place, thereby yielding a national three-wave panel survey with pre-campaign, campaign and post-election components.

The monthly national Continuous Monitoring Surveys (CMS) are a third feature of the 2010 BES. These monthly surveys began in April 2004 with funding provided by a grant from the National Science Foundation (US). They now extend through December 2012, and the total sample size is nearly 120 000 cases. The aim of the CMS is to track trends in public opinion in inter-election periods, since many key events which influence election outcomes occur months or years before polling day. The CMS has focused on monitoring public reactions to policy delivery, and data gathered in the project are utilized extensively in the present volume. In spring 2011 the CMS was adapted to the task of monitoring public opinion dynamics in the run-up to the referendum on the Alternative Vote in May 2011 and voting in that event. We also employ CMS data to study public reactions to the economic crisis and the austerity policies implemented by the Coalition Government.

The research design facilitated by these internet surveys is considerably more complex than the single post-election in-person survey

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which was the staple feature of the BES in earlier periods. Party support is subject to ongoing dynamics and consequential shifts in public opinion can occur years before an election is called, as well as during the official campaign period. The design of the 2010 BES enables us to capture changes in important variables that determine how individuals vote and it facilitates modelling effects of the context in which these changes occur. Survey data gathered frequently and regularly are required for empirical analyses of these dynamic processes – hence the RCPS and CMS.

The year 2013 represents the 50th anniversary of the first national election study in Britain, conducted by David Butler and Donald Stokes in 1963 (Butler and Stokes, 1969). The present book investigates political support in the New Labour and post-New Labour eras, but in view of this anniversary it is appropriate to look over this lengthy period and ask what changes have occurred in our understanding of forces driving voting and election outcomes and methodological approaches that facilitate investigation of these topics. A long-run perspective also shines light on theoretical implications of the valence model which extend beyond electoral politics. We examine these issues next.

Studying electoral politics in the long run

There have been major changes in electoral politics in Britain over the 50 years since David Butler first visited Ann Arbor and Donald Stokes first sampled claret at the Nuffield high table. Turnout in successive general elections from 1945 to 2010 are displayed in Figure 1.1, and it is clear that there has been a long-term decline in electoral participation over this 65-year period. The highpoint of postwar turnout occurred in 1950, a contest that was arguably the first real peacetime election after the Second World War. The 1945 election was something of an outlier since it took place only a matter of weeks after the Second World War ended in Europe with all of the disruption that implied. With many voters in the armed forces still scattered across various theatres of war we would not expect turnout to be high. However, in 1950 fully 84 per cent voted – a sharp contrast to the 2010 election when just over 65 per cent cast a ballot.

In fact, Figure 1.1 probably overestimates participation, since the percentages are calculated as the ratio of people who voted to those on the electoral register. If individuals are not on the register, this

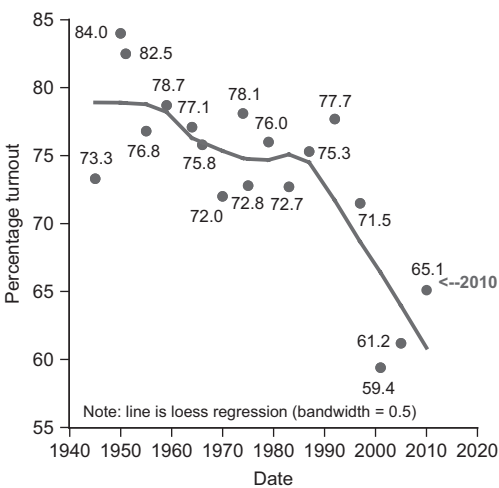


Figure 1.1 Turnout in British general elections, 1945–2010.
Source: Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 351.

will disqualify them from voting, regardless of their desire to do so. In the 2010 BES post-election in-person survey nearly 7 per cent of the respondents reported that they were not on the electoral register where they currently lived and a further 1 per cent said that they did not know. Expressed in terms of the potential electorate in 2010, these groups represent nearly 3.5 million people.²

Figure 1.1 shows that, since its high point in 1950, electoral participation gradually declined with the occasional rally in the early 1970s and 1990s. However, the trend was remorselessly down and the decline accelerated dramatically after 1997. The low-point was in 2001 when just over 59 per cent cast a ballot and turnout has revived only modestly in the two most recent elections. It is also the case that low turnout has been a feature of recent elections for the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, as well as London mayoral elections. Similarly, turnout in the 2011 AV referendum was a dismal 42 per cent. Overall, electoral participation in Britain has declined quite significantly since its heyday in the 1950s.

Figure 1.2 reports percentages voting for the three main parties plus the combined vote for various minor parties in general elections from 1945 to 2010. These percentages are calculated in terms of the eligible electorate rather than as percentages of those voting, in order

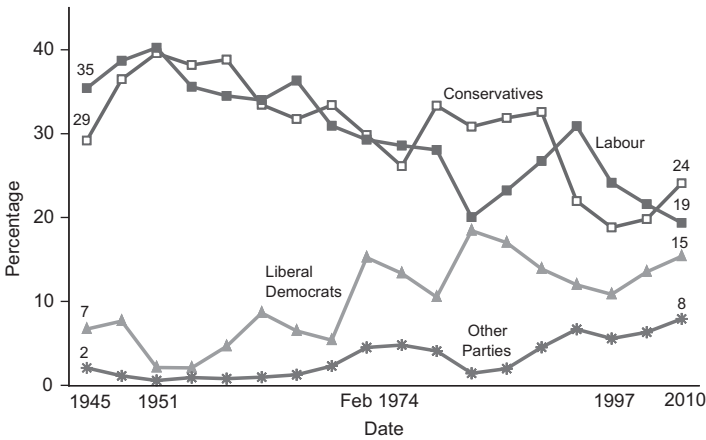


Figure 1.2 Parties’ vote shares as percentages of the electorate, 1945–2010 British general elections.
Source: Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 351.

to highlight the effects of declining turnout on party support. The overall picture conveyed in Figure 1.2 is one of a party system eroding over time. The process has not been linear; rather it has accelerated when particularly unsuccessful governments were in power, and it has responded to shocks generated by important events.

The Conservatives and Labour dominated the political arena between 1945 and 1974, although as Figure 1.2 shows a relatively gentle decline occurred in both parties’ shares of the electorate during this period. The February 1974 general election saw a dramatic increase in support for the Liberals following the unsuccessful Conservative administration of Edward Heath between 1970 and 1974. This was an era of rising inflation, industrial unrest and the three-day working week. Together with significant U-turns in government policies, the bad economy and the sour public mood did much to ensure the government’s defeat (Hennessey, 2000: 331–56). The Liberals received a second boost to their electoral fortunes following the split in the Labour Party in December 1981 and the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The subsequent Liberal–SDP Alliance came very close to pushing Labour into third place in the 1983 general election and this eventually led to the creation of the Liberal Democrats in 1988 (Whiteley *et al.*, 2006). These traumatic events for Labour set